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Boardman Fire is 'call jumping', say health district officials

EMS dispute continues

Boardman Fire and Rescue has been practicing what is known in the emergency medical business as "call jumping" or responding to emergency calls in the Boardman and Irrigon area where health district ambulances have already been dispatched, a practice that is not only illegal but also "unnecessary and a safety risk," says a Morrow County Health District official. Call jumping is only one of the many reasons the district has decided to move forward with its effort to stop 911 Emergency Medical Service (EMS) dispatching from the sheriff's office to Boardman Fire.

The allegations are part of an ongoing dispute between Boardman Fire and the health district over who responds to emergency medical calls in north Morrow County. The health district has, for 27 years, provided emergency medical service (EMS) there and has ambulances stationed in both Boardman and Irrigon. However, Boardman Fire Chief Michael Hughes recently acquired three ambulances, and now wants to license them and provide EMS services in the area, which he says will give citizens added medical protection and safety. Health district officials disagree, and this week requested the county sheriff 911 dispatch center stop sending EMS calls to Boardman Fire. Fire trucks have been used to respond to the medical emergency calls but are not transporting patients. The request does not affect dispatching Boardman Fire to fires, motor vehicle accidents or for 911 calls to the Boardman Police Department.

"The Boardman Fire and Rescue District are responsible for fighting fires and responding to motor vehicle accidents. That's their job and they're great at it," Morrow County Health District CEO Emily Roberts said in a statement released last week. The district also released an open letter to the public explaining their side of the disagreement (see page 3).

Roberts went on to say, "The Morrow County Health District (MCHD) provides EMS ambulance service and has been saving lives in Morrow County for 27 years. That's our job. The chief of the Boardman Fire and Rescue District (Michael Hughes) has been ignoring the county's pro-

ocols by "call jumping" and essentially showing up to every EMS call and trying to take matters into his own hands. As you might expect, this is not only illegal, but unnecessary and a safety risk," she said. "There is no need for both EMS ambulances and the fire department to show up to every call, nor is there a need for the fire department to spend public funds on an ambulance service when one already exists instead of fire department resources. If they focus on their job and we focus on ours, then the public wins," she added.

Previously responsible for just fighting fires and responding to motor vehicle accidents with their fire trucks, Boardman Fire will need a county license to operate ambulances. So far, no license has not been granted, so EMTs are responding to emergency medical calls with their fire trucks. When done in conjunction with already dispatched health district ambulances this has drawn charges of "call jumping" from the health district.

The county commissioners are ultimately responsible for issuing an operating license in the county, and Hughes has attended several commissioner meetings requesting that action. So far commissioners have not complied and now both sides have hired lawyers in the dispute.

The disagreement has also spilled over into the current recall effort going

on against county commissioners Melissa Lindsay and Jim Doherty. Both have refused to move forward and grant Boardman a license with the third commissioner, Don Russell being in favor.



Health District CEO Emily Reynolds Roberts

Hughes went as far as to attend an initial public recall meeting held earlier in Heppner, where he spoke to the crowd about his disagreements with the commissioners. Although his reasons are not stated on the recall petitions, he and members of the fire district were at the meeting picking up signature petitions to take back to Boardman.

The ambulance dispute began to heat up in March of this year when Hughes came to an EMS Advisory Committee (the board which oversees ambulance service in the county) requesting the county's Ambulance Service Area (ASA) plan be changed to allow Boardman Fire to be dispatched to all emergencies, not just fire and vehicle accidents.

In April the advisory board rejected Hughes request saying call jumping results in "risks to the public and patients that do not outweigh the benefit of that action." As examples they listed: traffic risks to the public for multiple providers coming in "hot" to a scene in an effort to be first on the scene; conflicts and disputes between care providers on scene; slowing delivery of care given; having multiple opposing treatment protocols in place

with patients; splitting resources that waste time and money and resulting delays in transport. Health district officials have described this as "more is not always better" in EMS care.

The denial of Hughes request to change the ASA plan and allow for Boardman Fire to be dispatched did not stop the sheriff 911 from continuing to dispatch, and the practice has continued to the present time. So, at a July 18 meeting the advisory committee voted to inform the sheriff's office it has been "operating outside the guidelines" for how 911 calls are to be handled in Morrow County. "Morrow County Sheriff's Office has ignored the MCHD determination and continued following its new practice of dispatching Boardman Rural Fire in addition to the health district ambulance service to all medical calls of any kind," the letter sent July 25 said.

In a separate letter, also sent July 26 to Boardman Fire, the health district used even stronger language about call jumping activities saying Boardman Fire was: 1) Operating emergency vehicles at **unsafe speeds** in an effort to **race** MCHD ambulances to non-emergency medical calls; (2) **Obstructing access** of MCHD ambulance vehicles and personnel at emergency and non-emergency medical scenes; (3) Making **unprofessional and derogatory statements** to patients and in the community relating to MCHD ambulance personnel medical care; (4) **Violating patient confidentiality** by making comments about specific calls when no longer on scene and rendering care; (5) Continuing to insist that the Morrow County Sheriff's Office dispatch the BFRD to all medical calls, despite the determination made by the MCHD and EMS Advisory Committee that this procedure is unsafe; and (6) Continuing to ignore and violate the ASA Plan and determination made by the MCHD and EMS Advisory Committee that this new dispatch procedure is unsafe by continually responding to all calls, including nonemergency calls, resulting in the violations."

In their letter to the public published in this



Boardman Fire & Rescue Chief Michael Hughes speaks to the crowd at a July 11 meeting in Heppner held to launch a recall effort against two county commissioners

Mahoney places 16th in the nation



Blane Mahoney (right) with his father, Mike Mahoney, as his hazer at a recent event. -Photo by Fast Shootin Photography.

Blane Mahoney ended his high school steer wrestling career placing 16th in the nation at the National High School Rodeo finals in Gillette, WY that ended on Saturday, July 23.

Blane clocked a 5.16 second run on his first round steer, placing 14th out of 150 competing steer wrestlers. He came back in the second round and recorded a 5.01 second run to place 10th in the round. His combined aggregate time of 10.17, put him in the second place high

call-back position heading into the top 20 short round held on Saturday night. The short round left Mahoney finishing 16th in the nation.

"I wish that I could have drawn a better steer in the final round, but I am grateful for the experience and to be able to compete at the highest level," Mahoney told the Gazette.

Blane will continue his rodeo career this fall under the Timberwolves flag at Blue Mountain Community College in Pendleton.

week's Gazette-Times the health district says it has "made many attempts to resolve this issue and develop a partnership with BFRD to enhance EMS services. Those attempts have not been successful. At this point, due to the continued public safety risk, MCHD is following the legal process outlined in the ASA Plan as we constructively work toward a reasonable, community-based resolution."

"Boardman Fire Rescue District is very good at what they do, and we are beyond grateful for their firefighting services. MCHD's EMS

first responders are also very skilled at what they do and have been saving lives in our communities for 27 years. Changing the way emergency medical services are deployed in Morrow County does not make sense. Not when there is already a system in place that is safe, effective, efficient and proven to save lives," the letter says.

The district said if Boardman Fire does not comply and stop attending medical emergency calls the dispute could, according to the ASA plan, end up in circuit court.

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• You're having a medical emergency and cannot speak on the phone.

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The Morrow County Sheriff's Office 9-1-1 Communications Center is now equipped to receive and respond to mobile phone SMS Text to 9-1-1 messages.

This service is available for use by the deaf, hard of hearing, or speech impaired and in situations where it is too dangerous to make a voice call to 9-1-1.

While calling 9-1-1 during an emergency is still the preferred way to ask for help, residents and visitors to the county are encouraged to "Call if you can, text if you can't."

For more information visit: <https://www.co.morrow.or.us/sheriff/page/text-911>.

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